



Analysis #13

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The Anti-Social Movement: The 2022 Convoy to Canberra and Freedom Movements

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This brief examines the ideologies and motivations of the protesters that congregated in Australia's federal capital, Canberra, in early 2022. The self-proclaimed 'Convoy to Canberra' movement called for the mass mobilisation of protesters seeking to abolish Covid-19 mandates instituted during the pandemic. These freedom movements across Australia became known by various names, with the stalwart Canberra contingent being colloquially and pejoratively known as 'the Cookers'. The Convoy comprised of protesters from around the nation, influenced by the increasing online presence of sovereign citizen and conspiracist social media activists, promoting anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine and anti-government ideologies. This mercurial collection of activists in Canberra's 'anti-social movement' (ASM) demonstrated a lack of cohesive or informed ideologies, falling in and out of favour with other national freedom movements. The hybridization of these 'anti' ideologies was overwhelmingly characterised as a disunited and dysfunctional collection of actors attracted by the social identity of the group as opposed to an ideologically cohesive extremist movement. The Canberra convoy initially evolved from a legitimate civil protest rally into a gathering of freedom protesters, occupying the city's showgrounds and parklands with a celebratory atmosphere comparable to a music festival. The protest movement lost momentum as leadership struggles and infighting highlighted individuals seeking political, financial and social media notoriety. What remained was a motley group of up to a dozen activists skulking daily outside the gates of the Governor General's residence, armed with a bullhorn and Red Ensign flags. This brief will articulate the motivations and ideological drivers of the Convoy to Canberra protesters from their inception to the remaining cohort that now represent the 'ASM'.

The various Australian freedom movements evolved, expanded and were extinguished in line with the easing of Covid-19 mandates. As vaccination rates increased worldwide without evidence of devastating side effects, society returned to what would become a version of the new normal. The fear and uncertainty that motivated many of the civil protests reduced significantly, with only the more extremist elements continuing their blockades and marches. The ASM demonstrated a different trajectory to other Australian protest movements, in that they maintained a continuous presence in the Canberra region with the intent of remaining in-situ until their goals were achieved. These goals, however, were unclear and in no way coherent. An illegal encampment on the lawns of the National Library led to police arresting a man described as a “doomsday prepper” after he was found to be armed with a loaded weapon, ammunition and the building plans for Parliament House.¹ Another arrest was made after a man drove a truck through a blockade, requiring police to smash the window and physically extricate him from the vehicle.²

The original Convoy influx was so extensive that events scheduled adjacent to the encampment were forced to be cancelled after fences separating the facilities were pushed down by protesters to expand for the thousands involved. The overflow included vehicles and campervans adorned with the Red Ensign flag,³ protest banners and placards espousing conspiracist theories. Revelers made extensive use of megaphones and public announcement systems to convey their convictions and overall goal to overthrow what they perceived to be a tyrannical and corrupt government. The disregard for laws and mandates by members of the encampment resulted in various degrees of anti-social and criminal behaviour, including an assault on a 67-year-old woman by a protester that subsequently used sovereign citizen-esque legalese in court after being charged with inflicting grievous bodily harm.⁴ The festival-like atmosphere gave the impression of an ideologically united movement, however, the individual motivations of professional activists and self-appointed leaders soon exhibited divisions and in-fighting within the encampment. Perhaps the most prominent incident preceded the Convoy, when the doors to Old Parliament House were deliberately set alight in December 2021, causing millions of dollars in damage, and signaling a terrifying reflection of right-wing extremist activity demonstrated in the USA's Capitol riots in January 2021.⁵ The Convoy to Canberra demonstrated similarities to other highly publicised domestic and international disruption rallies, including the convoy protesting the mandatory vaccination of truck drivers crossing the international border between Canada and the USA.⁶

The Canadian blockade was specifically an anti-vaccination motivated protest, however, soon demonstrated strong right-wing influences as Confederate flags, a Trump 2024 flag and MAGA hats were prominent amongst the other anti-government signage and rhetoric.⁷ The leading principle of the

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1 McHugh, Finn. 2022. Convoy to Canberra: Reece Kershaw alleges organiser had a map of Parliament House when he was arrested with gun, ammo. The Canberra Times. 15th February 2022. Convoy to Canberra: Reece Kershaw alleges organiser had a map of Parliament House when he was arrested with a gun, ammo | The Canberra Times | Canberra, ACT.

2 Ibid

3 The Red Ensign flag was a merchant navy flag co-opted by the Australian Sovereign Citizen Movement and antigovernment movements.

4 McNight, Albert. 2022. ‘You’re an idiot: magistrate blasts man accused of breaking woman’s wrist during Convoy to Canberra’, Riotact. 31st July 2022. [‘You’re an idiot: magistrate blasts man accused of breaking woman’s wrist during Convoy to Canberra’ | Riotact \(the-riotact.com\)](https://www.riotact.com/youre-an-idiot-magistrate-blasts-man-accused-of-breaking-womans-wrist-during-convoy-to-canberra/)

5 Frost, Harry, Gore, Charlotte & Mannheim, Markus. “Old Parliament ouse’s front door set on fire a second time as protests in Canberra continue” ABC News Online. 30th December 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-12-30/act-protesters-set-old-parliament-house-on-fire/100731444>

6 Frum, David. “Canada’s Trucker Blockades are a Warning”, The Atlantic, 11th February 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/02/canada-trucker-protests-spread-america/622039/>

7 Ibid

Convoy to Canberra was resoundingly focused on ‘freedom’ from lockdowns and mandates, however, demonstrated a convergence of anti-vaxx, sovereign citizen and conspiracist beliefs. The ‘salad bar’ phenomenon of multiple ideologies converging has been exemplified during the Covid pandemic.⁸ The anti-authoritarian, anti-law enforcement and conspiracist ideologies are situated within right-wing extremism, whereas anti-vaccination ideology can be argued to sit within both the left and right-wing realm. The categorisation of protesters the likes of the ASM as right-wing extremists remains a generalization that fails to examine the nuances of personal and political motivations as well as individual ideological drivers.

The original Convoy encampment provided an environment rife for cross-contamination of ideologies, especially amongst those seeking an identity amongst like-minded individuals. This contagion effect of ‘freedom’ activists being influenced by conspiracists, anti-vaxxers and sovereign citizens has been evident from the onset of the movement. Claims were made that the government had ‘microwaved’ peaceful protesters, had all telecommunication channels blocked to restrict protesters livestreaming the protest,⁹ and used long-range acoustic devices as sonic weapons causing them illness.¹⁰ Professional activist Simeon Boikov, aka the ‘Aussie Cossack’, interviewed and livestreamed from Canberra about feeling unwell as a result of the supersonic attacks, with other protesters claiming microwave radiation burns and that 5G rays were being beamed against the crowd.¹¹ Websites emerged selling products claiming to mitigate the alleged 5G radiation poisoning emitted by an Access Denial System that allegedly caused nausea, fever, headaches and fatigue, amongst a litany of other symptoms.¹² Twitter accounts blamed cloud seeding to be a government tactic to reduce and prevent additional protesters from joining the already dwindling number that remained after being evicted from the main Canberra showgrounds and parklands.¹³

As the months wore on and the ASM’s numbers dwindled, the activities and rhetoric of the remaining members became more inane and increasingly in line with traditional right-wing ideologies. Anti-Semitic sentiment, conspiracist theories of child trafficking rings being covered up by high-level government figures and vaccinations being tools of corrupt corporate greed, or a means to control the population was soon followed by increased anti-LGBTQI rhetoric. Convoy leaders claimed participation in the early February protests of 1.2 million people, as compared to more reasonable police and media reports of up to 10,000 people.¹⁴ An outlier within the ASM’s willingness to fall in line with increasingly conspiracist beliefs is the denial of ‘Chemtrails’ by ex-Qantas pilot Graham Hood, who’s active role within the movement arose from his refusal to be vaccinated.¹⁵

Despite conspiracism being a prominent element of the steadfast ASM, the sovereign citizen aspect remains a continued framework from which the freedom movements maintain their anti-government

8 Clarke, Colin. “Trends in Terrorism: What’s on the Horizon in 2022?” Foreign Policy Research Institute, 8th December 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/12/trends-in-terrorism-whats-on-the-horizon-in-2022/>

9 Canberra Protests 2022, WeAreChangeMelbourne, 15th February 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=1idxZCQXKo&fbclid=IwAR3ARAXpBZCqGkFUJRzNe0clbY3qdYZ2rXv0vVrfRs64mZqxberD1BAXHY4>

10 Muswellbrook Chronicle, “Craig Kelly plugs protest conspiracy of sonic weapons at Parliament House convoy to Canberra rally”, Muswellbrook Chronicle, February 21, 2022. <https://www.muswellbrookchronicle.com.au/story/7625165/sonic-weapons-craig-kelly-raises-conspiracy-theory-about-protesters-in-parliament/>

11 Cairns News Editor, “AFP deploy sonic blaster against women and kids at Canberra rally – no sign of PM Morrison or ALP leader Albanese, what are they afraid of?” Cairns News, 14th February 2022. <https://cairnsnews.org/2022/02/14/afp-deploy-sonic-blaster-against-women-and-kids-at-canberra-rally-no-sign-of-pm-morrison-or-alp-leader-albanese-what-are-they-afraid-of/>

12 EMF Report, “Treatment for Radiation Injury and Poisoning / LRAD / ADS” EMF / EMR Reports, <https://emf.report/treatment-for-radiation-injury-poisoning-lrad-ads/>

13 Ibid

14 Canberra Protests 2022, WeAreChangeMelbourne, 15th February 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=1idxZCQXKo&fbclid=IwAR3ARAXpBZCqGkFUJRzNe0clbY3qdYZ2rXv0vVrfRs64mZqxberD1BAXHY4>

15 Club Grubbery 4/8/22 The state of the nation and much more including those white trails in the sky. God bless and stayoutathetrees. Hoody and Johnny, <https://fb.watch/f1qwpGq7cN/>

ideology. The transnational Sovereign Citizen Movement (SCM) originated in the USA, however, gained momentum in many Commonwealth countries and European nations. Their anti-government, anti-law enforcement beliefs utilised various pseudo-legal arguments, making the SCM seemingly transferrable across vastly disparate constitutional frameworks. As such, the Sovereign Citizen label has become somewhat of an umbrella term, used to describe those espousing the core tenets and colloquialisms of the ideology, despite eschewing connections or membership of groups or their values. The presence of the Red Ensign flag has become the symbol of the Australian SCM citing maritime 'admiralty law' as the overriding authority of the government they deem to be a corrupt corporate entity. The SCM played a critical role in the escalation of anti-authoritarian attitudes, with the online environment proclaiming individuals could assert their right as a 'free person' and as such, have no legal obligation to comply with border lockdowns, mask mandates or mandatory vaccinations within certain industries. Failed political leader of the Australia One Party Riccardo Bosi, played a prominent role in the Convoy to Canberra, national freedom rallies and on social media. Despite not proclaiming to be a sovereign citizen, his AustraliaOne website indicates a commitment to Australian sovereignty,¹⁶ and in a speech given by Bosi in November 2021 his reference to our "unconstitutional governments that have no authority to make any laws, a treasonous bureaucracy that is directed by foreign powers" and "a compromised judiciary and their lust for children that is only exceeded by their lust for cocaine" is an incitement for people to take action against the "tyrannical government enslaving us".¹⁷

Professional activism, alignment with political parties and fundraising on social media was a central feature of the Convoy to Canberra and the remaining ASM. Professional activists the likes of Riccardo Bosi, Monica Smit and Simeon Boikov featured prominently in social media campaigns, aligning themselves with political parties in the lead up to the federal election. Boikov's alignment with the Convoy and other freedom movements also provided him further reach in recruitment of support of Russia after their February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. GoFundMe campaigns raised more than \$160,000 to fund the Convoy protesters, however, campaign organisers were unable to provide evidence of how the funds were used in support of the movement.¹⁸ Other fundraising campaigns included requests for financial assistance for legal fees resulting from charges laid against protesters including Smit and Boikov. Smit made public pleas for assistance in fundraising for her legal bills suggesting sums well over \$100,000, despite the offences for which she had been arrested being fine-only penalties. The cross-over and ideologically fluid nature of individuals like Smit were apparent when, in August of 2022, the freedom campaigner, political hopeful and self-styled martyr for the cause declared her intent to take the oath to become a sovereign citizen. In the latest of her profligate social media videos, her declaration to 'opt out' of being accountable to Australian law simply by declaring herself as a 'living person' merely confirmed her primary motivation was self-promotion, and not the protection of the Australian public.¹⁹ It also evidenced her potential commitment to SCM ideology, should the legal tactic prove successful.

The Canberra 'Anti-social Movement' emerged in response to international and domestic measures implemented to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The festive atmosphere created by thousands of

¹⁶ AustraliaOne Party Incorporated, 2022. www.australiaoneparty.com

¹⁷ Bosi, Riccardo. Freedom rally Riccardo Bosi speech, 20th November 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpakPB3KDRQ>

¹⁸ Purtill, James & Dalzell, Stephanie. "GoFundMe freezes \$160,000 until organisers of Convoy to Canberra protests detail spending plan", ABC News Online. 31st January 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2022-01-31/gofundme-freezes-canberra-covid-truck-convoy-money/100792930>

¹⁹ Francis, Chantelle. "Prominent anti-lockdown activists Monica Smit tests wild theory to avoid laws", News.com.au 11th August 2022, <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/real-life/news-life/prominent-antilockdown-activist-monica-smith-tests-wild-theory-to-avoid-laws/news-story/502e4b8046159096812bff16ad65a411>

like-minded activists soon splintered into various factions with divergent ideologies and individual motivations. The Convoy to Canberra commenced as a national movement, with thousands of protesters converging on the Australian capital. As the momentum slowed, resulting from continued expulsion from campgrounds, reduced mandates and cold Canberra weather, the ASM members dwindled to less than a dozen. Despite their minimal membership, the incoherent group continued their constant livestreams, but their daily proclamations were predominantly dismissed as little more than a nuisance. The police approach appeared to regard their activities as inconsequential and not worthy of inciting potential backlash, with the exception of incidents involving criminal complaints or those directly impacting members of the community. Their continuous presence did allow professional protesters to reintegrate their way into the protest movement without the need to leave the warmth and safety of their social media broadcasting locale. The community and collective identity the ASM and the freedom movements provided their members in a time of upheaval and uncertainty was critical to both the ongoing online support and the real world manifestations of the protest as a whole. The generally law abiding activities of the ASM, though monotonous, have been undermined by several members that have been actively escalating their behaviours as a means to keep the movement alive, as they have no housing or employment to return to. The ASM's activities may be viewed as a far stretch from conventionally understood extremist behaviour, however, the increasingly right-wing rhetoric and ideologies are the most alarming and potentially dangerous threat to Australia's national security. This normalization of extremist rhetoric and ideology comes at a philosophical cost not only to our Australian democratic society, but a financial cost in the measures imposed to protect these freedoms. The arson damage to Old Parliament House aside, figures for ACT Police estimated 40,500 man hours and \$3.5 million spent by May 2022 in managing the ongoing presence of the Convoy and ASM.²⁰ The democratic right to civil protest has played a central role within Australian society through a period of social and economic uncertainty. The freedom protests and ASM have remained predominantly peaceful, yet the infiltration of extremist ideology is proving to be more dangerous than the pandemic that mobilised the movement.

²⁰ Twyford, Lottie. "Protester bill now tallies \$3.5 million and more than 40,500 hours as police play 'Whac a Mole'. Riotact. 5th May 2022. <https://the-riotact.com/police-protester-bill-now-tallies-3-5-million-and-40500-hours-as-cops-play-whac-a-mole/554730>

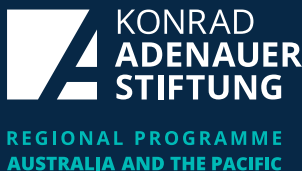
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Sgt Kristy Milligan VA (Ret) was a member of the New South Wales Police Force for 16 years until 2021. Kristy completed her Masters of Terrorism and Security Studies with Distinction through the Australian Graduate School of Policing, Charles Sturt University prior to commencing her PhD through Victoria University in 2022. Her PhD will examine the role of symbolism in terrorism and extremism. Her other areas of research include XRW idiosyncratic actors, including the Sovereign Citizen Movement, and symbolism in terrorist propaganda. Kristy has contributed to research on the exploitation of extremism during the Covid pandemic, and presented the paper's findings to the 2021 AVERT symposium. She presented to CSU's 2021 Threat Briefing series and the AFP's CT Investigators Program, discussing the role of symbolism in terrorism and extremism. She is combining her operational and academic knowledge to create professional development programs on terrorism and extremism. Kristy is currently involved in the development of technology designed to aide law enforcement and government agencies in combating terrorism and extremism.

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